

Part II: Living as the Church

1: Life in the Church

Not every culture is individualistic. But in the Western world, we tend to look up to Lone Rangers. Our heroes are strong and self-sufficient, and they tend to walk alone. Very often, the Western church tends toward this type of individualism. We hear Jesus's call to take up our cross and follow Him, and we decide to follow no matter what anyone else says or does. Of course, this is the right response, but we need to be careful here.

While every individual needs to obey Jesus's call to follow, we cannot follow Jesus as individuals. The proper context for every disciple maker is the church. It is impossible to make disciples aside from the church of Jesus Christ. Look at it from this perspective: the New Testament is full of commands to do this or that for "one another." Love one another, pray for one another, encourage one another, etc. So how can we teach people to "observe all that I have commanded" if they have no one to love, pray for, or encourage? It's impossible to "one another" yourself.

It's impossible to follow Jesus alone. We can't claim to follow Jesus if we neglect the church He created, the church He died for, the church He entrusted His mission to.

In this session and the two following sessions, we will place disciple making squarely within the context of the church. This session will examine the way in which we are called to live together as the church. Teaching people to obey what Jesus commanded is a never-ending process that requires us to intertwine our lives with the Christians around us. As disciple makers, we will join together with other believers, help them overcome the sin that holds them back, and challenge them to grow into more effective disciple makers.

The next two sessions will focus on the call to reach out to the people in our local setting and to the rest of the world. In each case, our call is to make disciples, and we must learn to fulfill that calling through the God-ordained vehicle of the church.

Committing Your Life to the Church

First, let's make sure that we are not guilty of belittling God's church in any way. It's not a social club; it's not a building, and it's not an option. The church is life and death. The church is God's strategy for reaching our world. What we do inside the church matters. We tend to equate church life with events and programs. But these are not what make a church. Programs are helpful to the extent that they facilitate the life and mission of the church, but we can't equate well-attended events with the health of the church.

God cares about the way we love each other and the way we pursue His mission. The church is a group of redeemed people that live and serve together in such a way that their lives and communities are transformed. What matters is your interaction with the people God has placed in your life. If you are not connected with other Christians, serving and being served, challenging and being challenged, then you are not living as He desires, and the church is not functioning as He intended.

Throughout the Bible, we see pictures of the global church (which includes all followers of Jesus in all locations) and the local church (which includes particular followers of Jesus in a particular location). Out of 114 times that the “church” is mentioned in the New Testament, at least ninety of them refer to specific local gatherings of believers who have banded together for fellowship and mission. God intends for every follower of Jesus to be a part of such a gathering under the servant leadership of pastors who shepherd the church for the glory of God.

Despite the clear priority that the Bible puts on believers being part of a local church, many followers of Christ try to live the Christian life apart from serious, personal commitment to a local church. The reasons are many. We are self-reliant and self-sufficient, and the kind of mutual interdependence and even submission and accountability to others that the Bible talks about frightens us. We are often indecisive, hopping from one church to another looking for the “perfect place” and the “perfect people.” Many of us have been hurt in the past by things that have happened to or around us in the church, and others of us simply don’t see the importance of being specifically connected to a local church.

But the Bible says the local church is important. God has entrusted local churches with godly leaders who teach us His Word and care for our souls (Heb. 13:17; 1 Pet. 5:1–8; 1 Tim. 3:1–13; 5:17; Titus 1:5–9). God has united us together in local churches to keep one another from sinning and straying from Christ (Gal. 6:1–5; Matt. 18:15–20). God has commanded us to gather together in local assemblies where we preach God’s Word, celebrate the Lord’s Supper, baptize new believers, and pray for and encourage one another (Acts 2:42; Heb. 10:24–25). Then we scatter to care for believers and to share the gospel with unbelievers (Acts 2:43–47). Clearly, being a disciple and making disciples involves committing your life to a local church where you are joined together with other believers under biblical leadership to grow in the likeness of Christ and to express the love of Christ to the world around you.

Bearing One Another’s Burdens

In Part I, we said that every Christian is a minister. Paul said that God gave pastors, teachers, and elders to the church so that they could teach the rest of us to minister.

A pastor's job is not to do all of the ministry in a church, but to "equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ" (Eph. 4:12).

So the question becomes: Whom should you be ministering to and how? Don't be overwhelmed by the task of ministering to others. It is just about faithfully serving the people God has placed in your life. Paul explained:

Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. (Gal. 6:1–2)

Ministry sounds intimidating until you develop a realistic view of what ministry is really about. Maybe you're not gifted to preach sermons, start a rehabilitation clinic, or lead a marriage retreat. But do you know people who struggle with sin? Do you know people who are carrying burdens? If so, then your first steps toward ministry are easy: help them.

We don't like getting involved in other people's problems. Our own problems are messy enough—why complicate things by taking on other people's junk? But the reason is simple: God calls us to help other people. He created us to function this way. Your problems are not just your problems—ultimately, they belong to the church body that God has placed you in. You are called to encourage, challenge, and help the other Christians in your life, and they are called to do the same for you. If you wait until all of your own issues are gone before helping others, it will never happen. This is a trap that millions have fallen into, not realizing that our own sanctification happens as we minister to others.

Getting beneath the Surface

We have to be clear about what it means to help the people God has placed in our lives. We gravitate toward solutions that are quick and easy. When it comes to helping people, we often address the surface level of the problem but never get down to the heart of the matter. When someone is grieving, we might hand him a book that helped us in a difficult moment.

But how many of us would take the time to really invest in his life? Would we listen on a consistent basis and offer help whenever we find a need that we are able to meet?

Or when we learn that a friend is struggling with sin, we are quick to explain why that sin is harmful and tell her we will pray for her (whether we follow through or not). But how many of us would take her struggle with sin so seriously that we would walk with her as she works through the issues involved?

It's not that Christians are uncaring. Very often, we really do want to help the people around us

however we can, but we get so focused on finding a quick solution to the external behavior that we overlook the real problem. Here's an example. If a friend struggles with anger, we find out what makes him angry, and then keep him away from the things that provoke his anger (e.g., don't drive during rush hour, interact with your boss as little as possible, avoid talking politics). But changing the external situation doesn't change his heart. In reality, his anger is rooted in his heart, and that anger will find a way to express itself even if his circumstances change.

When Jesus's disciples started eating without going through the necessary cleansing rituals, the Pharisees accused them of defiling themselves. But Jesus's response calls us to look beyond the external to what is going on in the heart:

"Whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?" (Thus he declared all foods clean.) And he said, "What comes out of a person is what defiles him. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person. (Mark 7:18–23)

Every struggle with sin that we could possibly encounter in our own lives or in the lives of the people around us are represented in the list Jesus offered here: evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, and foolishness. Jesus said that these things come from within. In other words, if we are trying to address these problems by regulating a person's circumstances or behavior, then we are wasting our time. These things come "out of the heart of man." Whatever help we can offer people who are struggling with sin has to be aimed at transforming hearts, not behavior.

Transformed by the Gospel

So how do we change a person's heart? It's impossible. We might be able to restrain a person's angry outbursts by tying him up and gagging him, but we are powerless to change a person's heart.

This is where God's plan of redemption comes into play. The gospel is not merely about "getting us saved," as if we simply pray a prayer and are immediately transported into heaven. God describes "salvation" and the transformation of the Christian life like this:

I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. (Ezek. 36:26–27)

This is a cataclysmic event. “Getting saved” is not about praying a prayer and then continuing to live our lives as though nothing happened. No, when God enters our lives, we are changed from the inside out.

The good news is that God has acted in the person of Jesus Christ. Through His life, death, and resurrection we are transformed, made new. Our problem lies at the core of our being, but God transforms our hearts. God literally places His Spirit within us and changes us from the inside out.

So as we come alongside the broken, hurting people God has placed in our lives, let’s remember where our power comes from. These are not mere physical issues that we can correct through hard work. These are spiritual issues that run deeper than we can imagine. Yet God has supplied us with everything we need in order to fulfill His calling. The power to transform hearts and change lives comes from the Holy Spirit (John 6:63), through the Word of God (2 Tim. 3:16–17), and through prayer (James 5:16–20).

As we use the Scriptures to give counsel to others, there is power (Heb. 4:12). As we pray passionately for their hearts to change, there is power. We cannot remove the lust from another’s person’s heart by our own efforts, but we have the Spirit of God working through us. Through the gospel, people can be set free from the enslaving power of sin (Rom. 6). Through the gospel, we are actually empowered to uproot the sin in our hearts and live in a way that pleases God (Gal. 5 and Rom. 8). Paul promised: “If by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live” (Rom. 8:13).

Bearing one another’s burdens is not easy, but it is also not optional. We have to face this challenge head on: a church full of isolated individuals feeling defeated by their sin and stripped of their joy was never God’s plan for the church. Jesus intended for His church to advance powerfully through the centuries, full of love and joy. Jesus was clear: “I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matt. 16:18).

Paul reminded us that the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus Christ from the dead is working through us (Eph. 1:15–23; Rom. 8:11). God intends for His church to be a united body, not a cluster of isolated individuals.

He has empowered us to bring truth and transformation into the lives of the people around us, not to be satisfied with handing out books and warm wishes. If the church is going to fulfill its God-given mission in our modern world, we are going to have to take our responsibility to one another seriously. We will have to accept His call to bear one another’s burdens—even when it’s messy, even when we find ourselves in over our heads.

So when a sister in Christ is speaking harmful words about another member of the church body, we will take the time to help her see the pride and lack of love in her heart and walk with her as she asks the Spirit to transform her heart on this issue. When we find a brother in Christ who is enslaved to his lustful desires, we will help him to understand the fear of the Lord and call out to God to transform his selfish desires into genuine love. Though you may not have a degree in psychology, you are still called to stand with the Christians in your life as they pursue the healing and transformation that only come through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Every Member Doing Its Part

The mission of your church is too important to leave to everyone else. The moment you begin to believe that your church can be healthy while you sit on the sidelines, you have given up on God's plan of redemption. God placed you in your unique situation because He wants you to minister to and with the other Christians He has placed around you. Paul's vision for the church included every Christian:

We are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love. (Eph. 4:15-16)

The goal of the church is to grow up in every way into the likeness of Christ. But the church will never reach this goal unless "each part is working properly." This doesn't mean that we will all function in exactly the same way, but it does mean that we all have a responsibility. It also means that if you are not active in the church, you are hurting your brothers and sisters. One paralyzed leg forces the rest of the body to work twice as hard to make up for that leg's inactivity. God made you to be exactly who you are, and His Spirit has empowered you with unique spiritual abilities, or "gifts." Together, we function as one body. Until you and every person in your church are actively ministering to the people around you, your area will not have an accurate picture of what the church was created to be.

When we step outside of ourselves and begin bearing the burdens of the people around us, it is time-consuming, messy, and often confusing. But it is necessary. Helping people change is what discipleship is all about. As we help other Christians follow Jesus, we are going to run into the temptations, lies, and idols that hold them back. It will be difficult, but we know what Jesus has accomplished, and we know how this story will end.

We have a part to play in God's plan of redemption. It won't always be fun, but we must be faithful to God's calling.

Part II: Living as the Church

2: The Local Church

You are on this earth to continue the mission that Jesus left for you: “Go and make disciples of all nations.” But you can’t do that on your own, nor are you expected to. God tells us to work together with the Christians He has placed in our lives to bring His healing and transformation into the life of the world. His plan of redemption involves the church working in unity to reach the people around.

Inside the church, this means that we devote ourselves to the members of our church body. We have a responsibility to challenge one another, to love one another, and to serve one another in a variety of ways. When every member takes this seriously, it makes for a healthy church (Eph. 4:16). And when the church functions as God intended, the results are nothing short of miraculous. The church becomes a place of healing, a picture of how God wants humanity to live.

But this vision goes beyond the people within a church body. We don’t love and serve the Christians around us solely to maintain healthy churches. God’s plan is bigger than that. It involves reaching out to the whole world. His plan of redemption will not be completed if we are satisfied with those who are already on the inside. An inwardly focused church is an unhealthy church. It is a dying church. Biblically, a church that fails to look at the world around it is no church at all.

Jesus was clear about His purpose on earth: “The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10). Similarly, our calling is focused on reaching those who don’t know God:

You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven. (Matt. 5:14–16)

Our focus is not inward. We live in the midst of a threatening environment, but we are more like a lighthouse than a bomb shelter. We are not called to hide from trouble but to guide others through it. We cannot fulfill our mission unless we serve one another in love, but living together in a tight-knit circle is not our ultimate goal. God has placed your church in the midst of a broader community so that He can spread His love, hope, and healing into the lives of the people around you.

Known by Our Love

We know that we’re supposed to love one another. The two greatest commandments are to love God and love people (Mark 12:28–31). Love is basic to what it means to be a follower of Jesus, and it

should be what motivates us to reach out to the world around us. The only reason that we can love anyone else is because God loved us first (1 John 4:19). We are transformed by love because “God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Rom. 5:5).

But what is the purpose of this love? Love should characterize the way we interact with one another. But why? Because this is how the world will recognize us:

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. (John 13:34–35)

Let’s say you spent three years following Jesus closely and studying at His feet. That should make a difference in your life, right? Other people should be able to look at your life and notice a change. Something about you should signal your connection to Jesus. But the difference should not just be in our teaching or even in our pursuit of holiness. They should notice a love like they have never seen.

Jesus told His disciples that they should look different because of their love. Something about the way we love the people around us should signal to the world that we belong to Jesus. Our mission will include preaching, encouraging, rebuking, serving, studying, suffering, and many other things. But if all of these activities are not manifestations of love, then we have missed the point.

A Compelling Community

On the night He was betrayed, Jesus prayed for His disciples. This was a pivotal moment for them, and Jesus prayed that they would be strengthened, focused, and protected. Interestingly, Jesus did not pray only for His disciples, but for “those who will believe in me through their word.” In other words, Jesus prayed for us. Pay careful attention to what Jesus prayed on our behalf:

I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me. (John 17:20–23)

Jesus prayed that we would be united. Why? So that the world would believe that Jesus was sent by God, and so that the world would know that God loves us. Isn’t it amazing that Jesus believed that the unity of His church would communicate all of this to the world? So often we assume that having right and logical arguments will be enough, but Jesus said the world will be convinced by our unity. And when you think about it, haven’t we all heard the objections from unbelievers who point to divisions in the church as a cause for their disbelief?

Notice that Jesus's prayer assumes that our life together as Christians won't be hidden from view. Our unity is something that the world will be able to see. Nowadays, church life can become so introverted and privatized that the world never sees the way we interact with one another. If all we ever do is gather in a private building on Sundays and perhaps meet in someone's home for a midweek Bible study, the world will never know whether we are united or not. If Jesus's desire for us is to be realized, we are going to have to stop hiding from the eyes of the unbelieving world. Jesus prayed for our unity, which means that we have to focus on loving and serving each other. But we need to be doing this in such a way that the world can see what we are doing and recognize it as a picture of unity.

When was the last time someone asked you about your faith? Most of us would have to answer "never." Why do you think that is? The New Testament assumes that people will be able to look at the church, and that they will be struck by what they see. Listen to Peter's exhortation:

Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. (1 Pet. 3:13-16)

Peter was speaking about suffering when we haven't done anything to deserve it. What should happen when we suffer for doing good? We should honor Christ in our hearts, and we should be ready to explain our hope. Peter assumed that we are going to suffer unjustly, and that when we do, we are going to respond with so much hope and joy that people will ask us what is going on. And when that happens, we should be ready to proclaim the gospel.

But it doesn't happen like that for most churches. There isn't anything compelling about the way we live together. Our love isn't very noticeable. Our unity is either nonexistent or hidden behind the doors of the fellowship hall. When we suffer, it's usually because we've done something wrong. In the rare event that we experience suffering that we didn't earn, we respond by complaining.

In other words, we don't give anyone a reason to ask about what makes us unique, so nobody asks. Yet we still feel the need to evangelize. So we end up coming across like salespeople peddling a product that didn't really work for us. We should all pray for the courage to tell others about Jesus, but we also should be working toward the love and unity that makes the church attractive. Let's not place our hope in clever sales tactics. Let's not give up on Jesus's strategy of reaching people simply because it feels impossible at times. Jesus's strategy was the life of the church. We must stick with His

plan and pray that supernatural love begins to characterize our churches.

Jesus said that the world would recognize us by our love and unity. Peter said that people would be compelled by our hope. But are love, unity, and hope the words that unbelievers use when describing your church?

A Kingdom of Priests

As you will see in the sessions on the Old Testament, God made a covenant with Moses and Israel. As God spoke with Moses on Mount Sinai, He explained how Israel would relate to Him and what it would mean for Him to live in their midst. Israel's calling and identity were clear: "You shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex. 19:5–6). Though all the earth belongs to God, Israel belonged to God in a special way—they were His people. They were a holy nation, a group of people set apart for God's purposes. And they were a kingdom of priests.

A priest represented the people to God—interceding on their behalf—and represented God to the people—mediating His truth, commands, and grace into their lives. Israel stood collectively as a kingdom made up of priests. They stood amid all the nations of the earth in a priestly role, ready to represent the nations to God and God to the nations.

When you study the New Testament, you will see that the church is given this same vocation. "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Pet. 2:9). In God's plan of redemption, the church is called to be and to do what Israel failed to be and to do. The purpose of the church is to work together to reach out to the world around us. We have been called out of darkness into His marvelous light so that we can proclaim God's excellencies to a watching world.

Your Church Matters

We are called to make disciples, and strengthening the other members of the church body is an important part of this. But if we are not working together to help the unbelieving world around us become followers of Jesus, then we are missing the point of our salvation. God blessed Abraham so that He could bless the world through him (see Gen. 12). If your church is not actively blessing the surrounding community, then you are ignoring God's mission. We can never forget that we have a role to play in God's plan of redemption. You should feel honored to know that God has a plan for your church in particular.

Though God's church is meant to cover the globe, there is no church aside from the local church. God has placed you in your unique setting, alongside a unique group of Christians, for the purpose of proclaiming Him to the unbelieving world around you. The way you interact with these people matters. It doesn't matter whether your church is thousands strong or if you meet with two other Christians in a living room. It doesn't matter if your church was formed yesterday or one hundred years ago. But the way your church functions does matter. Your church is essential to God's ongoing plan of redemption. Remember that God left His church to fulfill His mission, and He didn't leave a backup plan. If your church does not pursue God's mission, then your community misses out on being exposed to the hope that God offers them in the gospel. Too many churches miss out on the vibrant life Jesus wants us to experience as we pursue His mission together.

The life of your church is a matter of life and death. God tells us how the story will end, but you have an essential role to play nonetheless. Will you help your church step up, look at the community around you with the compassion of Jesus, and call them into the plan of redemption that has transformed your church body? There's a reason God has you in this church at this point in history. You can help your church become an attractive community that exhibits Christ's love, unity, and hope.

Part II: Living as the Church

3: The Global Church

As important as the local church is, God's plan extends way beyond your town. As much as God wants you to reach the people in your community, He has no intention of stopping there. God's plan of redemption reaches into your neighborhood—and to every other city, village, and jungle around the globe!

If your church bands together and reaches out to every individual in your community, you are still not done with God's mission. No matter how big of a revival you experience, your area is still only a small part of the world that God has sent us to transform through His gospel. Until our vision of the church encompasses the entire globe, we do not have an accurate view of God's church or His plan of redemption.

All the Families of the Earth

Let's go back to the very beginning. As soon as God's good world became corrupted by the sin of Adam and Eve, God made a promise to restore it. God told the serpent:

I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel. (Gen. 3:15)

The devastating influence of sin would affect all of mankind, and the struggle for redemption would be between the offspring of the woman and the offspring of the serpent. Ultimately, this promise became a reality in the person of Jesus Christ, who crushed Satan's head by dying on the cross and rising from the grave. But it is also important to see that this promise belongs to the human race. It is not confined to any ethnic group or geographical location. The promise of redemption is as broad as humanity.

God reiterated this promise to Abraham:

I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. (Gen. 12:2–3)

The blessing that God promised here worked itself out through Abraham's descendants: the people of Israel. Ultimately, the blessing centered upon one Israelite in particular, Jesus of Nazareth. But we have to remember that although the promise came through one nation, the blessing has always been intended for all nations.

God has called your church to play a role in His plan of redemption. And since His plan is a global plan, your church needs to think beyond your city limits. You can't be everywhere at once, and your resources and manpower are limited. But in order to be a part of God's mission on earth, you need to think in global terms.

Where Christ Has Not Been Named

When you study the New Testament, you will look at Paul's missionary career. Though we may think of Paul as a theologian or a pastor, he was a missionary in every sense of the word. Much of the book of Acts follows Paul as he travelled—often amid great danger, difficulty, and persecution—from place to place, proclaiming the gospel and forming churches among those who responded by following Jesus.

It wasn't an accident that Paul spent so much of his life spreading the gospel to new areas. In Romans 15:20–21, Paul explained that this was his passion:

I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else's foundation, but as it is written, "Those who have never been told of him will see, and those who have never heard will understand."

When Paul said “as it is written,” he was quoting Isaiah 52, which describes Jesus as the servant of the Lord who would suffer in order to bring healing to His people. Earlier in the chapter, God clearly explained that although He was speaking directly to Israel, His salvation is for all of the nations, and He would specifically send ministers to spread this good news:

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, “Your God reigns.” ... The LORD has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations, and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God. (Isa. 52:7, 10)

Interestingly, Paul cited the beginning of this passage earlier in the book of Romans. Paul made clear not only that salvation is offered to all mankind but also that we are called to take an active role in spreading the gospel:

There is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!” (Rom. 10:12–15)

So what does this all mean? God’s plan of redemption belongs to all of humanity, yet only those who have heard the message are able to respond to it. Paul’s ambition in life was to take this message of redemption and bring it to those who had never heard. Keep in mind that Paul’s passion to spread the gospel more broadly was not a personal preference. It was an essential part of the mission that Jesus gave to the church. Remember that Christ commanded us to make disciples among all nations. We misunderstand God’s plan of redemption unless we see it reaching to all humanity.

Before the End Will Come

This world will not end until God’s plan is accomplished. God sends His people out into the world to embody and to proclaim His healing, and He will not wrap up human history until this has been accomplished. If His plan has always been about redeeming people from every nation on earth, then He is not content with happy, healthy churches in our communities alone—and we shouldn’t be either. Though we should long to see Christ glorified in our immediate context, we should share Paul’s passion to see Him glorified in every corner of the globe.

Though the details surrounding the end of the earth and timeframe of many of the prophecies in the Bible are the subject of frequent debate, Jesus made clear that the message of the gospel should not

be isolated to one part of the globe: "This gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come" (Matt. 24:14).

Many Christians are surprised to hear that there are still many groups of people around the world that have never heard the name of Jesus. We take it for granted that the people around us have access to the gospel if they ever develop an interest. Even if there's not a church or a Christian in close proximity (though this is difficult to imagine), at the very least everyone has access to gospel messages on the television, radio, or Internet. But that is simply not the case worldwide. There are people around the world who desperately need hope, healing, and salvation, but who don't have access to the message of redemption.

Paul's questions are as relevant today as they were two thousand years ago: How will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in Him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent?

These questions should burn in our minds and in our hearts. We are not following Jesus fully if we are not concerned about proclaiming the "gospel of the kingdom ... throughout the whole world" (Matt. 24:14). This is what Jesus did while He was on earth. And now, through the power of His death and resurrection, Jesus calls us to do the same.

Working Together for the Gospel

Once we start developing a passion for Christ's glory to be seen around the world, we need to figure out what role we are called to play. Make no mistake, every Christian is called to be involved in spreading the gospel around the world! No one is off the hook. No one is called to a life that is separate from global missions. But this doesn't mean that we all need to immediately start packing for the jungle.

God may well want you to take His gospel overseas. Too many Christians discount that possibility too quickly. Some people are too comfortable with their current lifestyle and would never dream of sacrificing their comfort for God's glory. Others quickly assume that they are called to something else, something more normal. We shouldn't make these assumptions. Have you ever genuinely told God that you would submit yourself to His will in this area? Right now, you should ask God if He wants you to pursue living in a different location for the sake of the gospel. It may be a terrifying thought, but we have to trust God more than we trust ourselves. We are here on this earth for His glory. God has blessed you so that you will use whatever He has given you for His glory, not yours. Ultimately, we should expect God's plan to lead us places that we wouldn't naturally go.

We all need to consider whether God is calling us to follow Him onto the mission field, but we have to remember that this is not the only way of working to fulfill God's plan to reach every nation. If we decide that God wants us to remain in the area in which He has placed us for the time being, then we need to be using our resources to further the mission around the world. Even if we find our primary ministry in the people directly surrounding us, we need to be praying for our fellow workers in other parts of the earth. The church is spread across the world, and we need to be doing everything in our power to reach people in every corner of the globe.

John wrote a letter to a Christian man named Gaius who had been helping missionaries as they travelled to spread the gospel more broadly. His words put our role in supporting missionaries around the world in perspective:

It is a faithful thing you do in all your efforts for these brothers, strangers as they are, who testified to your love before the church. You will do well to send them on their journey in a manner worthy of God. For they have gone out for the sake of the name, accepting nothing from the Gentiles. Therefore we ought to support people like these, that we may be fellow workers for the truth. (3 John v. 5–8)

John said that "we ought to support people like these" (i.e., missionaries), and that in supporting them we are actually "fellow workers for the truth." None of us is beyond the task of missions. We are all in this together. We all have a part to play. We may never set foot in a remote jungle, but our lives should be devoted to seeing God's will be done in our neighborhoods and in Africa and Papua New Guinea. When we take up the call to follow Jesus, we are committing to making disciples in our hometowns and in the Middle East. The question is not whether or not we will be working to spread the gospel around the world, but what role we will play in this. A church that is not devoted to the cause of Christ around the world is not a church in the biblical sense.

A Vision of the End

God tells us that history is moving toward a specific and glorious end. God promised Abraham that through him all the nations of the earth would be blessed. This is what God's plan of redemption has been about from the very beginning. And when we look ahead to the end of the story, we see that God's promise to Abraham will be fulfilled. There is no doubt about whether or not the church will fulfill its mission; we know for certain that this is how the world will end.

John was actually allowed to see the fulfillment of this promise that God made to Abraham:

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to

our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" (Rev. 7:9–10)

This is where we are headed. As distant and unfamiliar as the churches in India, Africa, China, and Papua New Guinea may seem, our future is inextricably tied to theirs. When Jesus returns to reclaim this world as its rightful King, we will find ourselves praising God alongside Christians from every age and from every nation on earth.

God's plan for our future ought to affect the way we live and think today. Does the church in China matter to you? When you hear about the persecution that Christians are enduring in other parts of the world, do you feel any compassion for them? When you hear about a mission setting off for Iraq or Thailand, do you make plans to pray for them or support them financially? These are our brothers and sisters. Their mission is the same as ours. They are working together with us toward the same goal. We cannot fulfill the mission that God has given us without them.

Jesus called His followers to be His witnesses "in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). We have not yet reached the end of the earth, but through the power of God's Spirit, we will. As followers of Jesus Christ, our calling is to faithfully make disciples.

These disciples are also called to make disciples. Jesus promises that He will be with us as we do this, right down to the very end (Matt. 28:20). We don't know when that end will come, but we want to be faithful in making disciples until that time comes. We are God's creations, living in God's earth, placed within God's plan of redemption. May our lives be devoted to His kingdom and His glory.